

Ipswich Unitarians

THE END OF AGES: FUTURE VISIONS OR FUTURE REALITIES?

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Reflecting on the various disasters that had overtaken the Israelites in the past, Saint Paul wrote to the church in Corinth: “All these things were recorded as a warning for us, upon whom the end of ages has come” (I Corinthians 10: 11).

As it happened, “the end of ages” had not come, and rather than finding themselves involved in the final judgement and the “end of history” (to coin a more recent, and equally inaccurate, phrase), those early Christians had to get used to the idea that there was to be a rather more lengthy and humdrum future.

And yet, throughout subsequent history, Christians – and people of other faiths, too – have looked forward to some great event that would end the world as they knew it and bring about something entirely new. There are still plenty of people today who believe such things. Generally speaking, though, we in the Unitarian and Free Christian tradition are not among them. Although it may be, as the old hymn has it, that, “God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year,” that purpose remains veiled in mystery, and we are not in the business of predicting dates for the apocalypse or declaring that, “the end of the world is nigh”.

But does that mean we have no interest in the future and nothing to say about it? I don’t think so. But the problem with the future is that we really have no idea at all what it will bring, either in the short or the long term. We may make educated guesses but anything we say will be a hostage to fortune. And if we want evidence of that, we have only to look at the past.

In 1512, five hundred years ago, who would have guessed that the next hundred years would see the collapse of Rome’s monopoly on Church power and theology, and the dissolution of the monastic religious houses that were hitherto such a dominant feature of the national life and landscape?

In 1612, who would have guessed that the next hundred years would see the country torn apart by civil war, a king executed, a republic declared, and the Church of England purged of its bishops?

In 1712, who would have guessed that the next hundred years would see the American colonies seize their independence and set an example that many countries were to follow, while here at home another revolution would begin and see the rise of vast new industries which were destined to utterly transform the lives of millions.

In 1812, as Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s poem about Britain’s future decline was being published, who would have known that a baby boy had just been born who would grow up to be England’s greatest novelist in a century of great novelists, a veritable golden age of literature. And who would have predicted that the entire human understanding of what life is and how it came to be, would be utterly transformed by a shy, retiring naturalist who was to make some interesting observations while on a voyage round the world.

And in 1912, who would have guessed that the next hundred years would see wars more terrible than anything that had been imagined since the Book of Revelation; and a technological revolution that would change human life beyond almost anyone’s wildest dreams.

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So, in 2012, it would be a rash person indeed who declared with any certainty at all what the world will be like in 2112. We know what worries us now, and we have an idea of the challenges that we and our successors will face: global warming and the consequences of climate change; unprecedented numbers of people to feed and house and otherwise sustain; new conflicts over water, land, and religion. At least, that's how it seems now. But it may be that other things entirely will come to dominate the next hundred years.

The 20th century saw several attempts to foresee the future. Aldous Huxley's 'Brave New World', for instance, and George Orwell's '1984', but neither of these has proved particularly accurate as yet. They presented us with dystopian visions of a nightmare future, and we seem rather fond of dystopian visions and their depressing predictions. But the only one that seems to me to have foreseen the future with any accuracy is E. M. Forster's short story, 'The Machine Stops'. Here the world's population, insulated from the natural world, dwell in sunless apartments, glued to glowing screens through which their lives are lived, connected to a global network, the Machine, on which they have become utterly dependent for inter-personal relations, communication, information, entertainment, food provision, and just about everything else. Which is all very well – until the Machine stops!

Not all the 20th century's future visions were negative. Gene Roddenberry, back in the 1960s – that most optimistic of decades – gave us 'Star Trek' and its vision of a world without hunger or poverty, war or money, nation-states or even religion, other than a benign humanism. The Earth had become a haven of peace, its people had overcome all their old divisions, and it had become part of a galactic federation of planets dedicated to spreading these values among the stars. In the 1960s all these things seemed possible! Sadly, though, we still await that united, peaceful Earth, just as we still await the starships!

But who knows what things will be like in a hundred years time? What world-transforming achievements and discoveries will be made by people still unborn? And there is hope in that. If it should seem to us that we face insuperable problems, that we don't have the knowledge or the vision to save the world from the follies of the present, why should we suppose that rising generations will not produce the thinkers, the scientists, the inventors, the visionaries, the leaders in politics, industry, or religion, to find a way through the tangle of problems that seems so impenetrable to us?

Of course, they may not - and there is no copper-bottomed guarantee that everything will turn out as we would wish. But human beings have a resilience and a resourcefulness that should never be underestimated. In any case, the future is not ours to determine. We can only do the best we can in the present, doing what seems the best and the wisest and the most loving thing in the circumstances. And that means not screwing things up if we can possibly avoid it, and not leaving our successors with problems that we could have sorted out ourselves before handing the world over to them.

In the long sweep of history from Saint Paul to ourselves, human beings have consistently failed to make accurate predictions about the future. Each generation has had to find its own way, make its own discoveries, its own mistakes; and each generation has made its own contributions – be they practical, philosophical, artistic, scientific, or spiritual – to the human story. And that story, I suspect, has quite a way to go yet.

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But are there any constants, any truths that remain unchanged down the centuries? I think there are, and they were known to Paul as they are known to us. They are truths about how human beings should relate to each other and treat each other. And that is with love; with a profound respect and compassion that sees in another human being – in every human being – a quality, a spark, a potential, that is Divine: the creative power of the universe made flesh, and personal.
